School's in for summer

During the summer, 19 enthusiastic students chose not to spend their time at the beach, hiking or hanging out with their friends. Instead, they were exploring the world of open source software, writes Kristina Hoeppner.

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For two weeks in January, the latest Catalyst IT Open Source Academy provided an accelerated learning environment for aspiring hackers and programmers where, under the guidance of Catalyst staff and other enthusiasts, they were introduced to open source development work.

The first week was dedicated to learning the basics of software development. The students had a full schedule that included presentations as well as hands-on sessions in a number of areas, including:

- setting up their own Linux server and Ubuntu desktop;
- the basics of HTML, CSS and JavaScript;
- programming in PHP, Python and Java for Android;
- business analysis processes;
- working with a source control system and quality control;
- graphic design with The Gimp and Inkscape; and
- open source principles and freedoms, and the many ways of contributing to an open source project.

Armed with this knowledge, they spent the following week each working on a project to which they wanted to contribute.
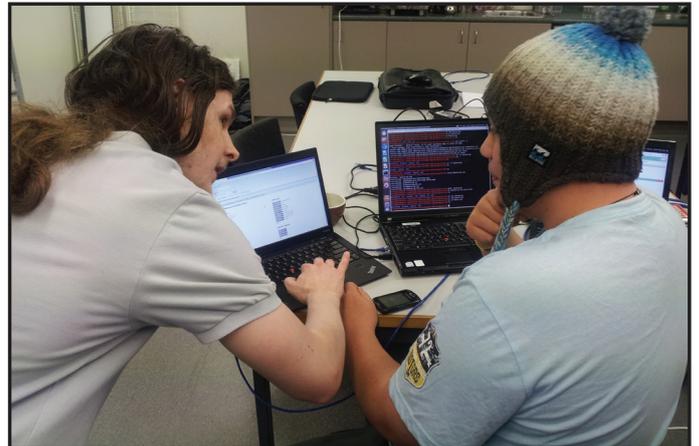
› Drupal

The Drupal team worked on the Geckoboard Push Statistics module. Mentor Adam Bramley helped the students to accomplish their goal of contributing to this plug-in. The students also used a module review tool to learn best practices in Drupal development and committed fixes back to the community in other projects. The work on the Geckoboard module will be contributed back for use on the NZ Post website, and it's currently being reviewed to be promoted to a full project on the Drupal.org community.

› Kiritaki Koha

This Android app for the popular integrated library management system Koha was the first choice of many of the students, and mentor Javier Romero was in high demand. The students worked on improving the usability of the app by reducing taps, translated it into Japanese, and created a video (fizurl.com/kohachanges) showcasing it all.

› Koha

Although only one student worked on Koha this year, he accomplished a great deal together with his mentors, Chris Hall and Liz Rea. He used Bootstrap (twitter.github.com/bootstrap/) to improve the accessibility of the staff interface and also give the new functionality a fresh and modern look. By submitting his patch to the community, he became committer number 200 in the Koha project.

› Mahara

Five students worked on fixing bugs and implementing new features in the Mahara ePortfolio web app with the help of their mentor Hugh Davenport, of Aura Security, who had previously worked on Mahara at Catalyst. Altogether, the students made 20 contributions to this project, improving on-screen messages, implementing new settings options, relocating menu options for improved usability and fixing theming bugs.

› Mezzanine

The content management system Mezzanine (mezzanine.jupo.org) made its debut this year, and three students explored it. Assisted by Jonathan Harker, they created a Drupal importer and looked at the security of Django code in Mezzanine.

Although the two-week Academy is now over, the programming does not stop for the students. A number of them have expressed interest in continuing to be involved in the project they had worked on during the second week, or working on a different one. They can keep in touch and also ask their mentors questions in the Moodle instance (https://ako.floss.ac.nz/) that was set up for the Academy.

"It's a great inspiration to see the students learning and taking part in the Academy, " said coordinator Ian Beardslee. "We make no excuses that the first week is fast paced, intensive learning. Putting that knowledge into working on a real project helps show the students the opportunites that exist. It's a hope that the Academy is a spark that sets off great things from the participants." ›

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